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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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No. 147 AUGUST 19TH, 1942

DEAR MEMBER,

The Air-Marshal, Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, has given a broadcast message, previously approved by the Government, to the German people explaining our bombing policy.

THE BOMBING OF CITIES

Mr. D. M. Mackinnon in the current number of *Theology* asks how the Christian valuation of personal relations can be reconciled with the bombing of Rostock and Cologne, and refers to the " delicate evasions " of the Christian News-Letter on this subject, which have " met, in Oxford at least, with rather devastating comment."

I believe that the meaning of life is found in relations between persons. But personal relations do not constitute the whole of life. Loyalty to the truth of material things is part of our duty to God as well as response to persons. We have also to take seriously the fact of the *State*. To interpret human action exclusively in terms of personal relations and leave out of account the hard, perplexing facts of State and nation, is to demand a world different from that which God has made, and for that reason is not, in my view, a Christian attitude.

The vital question for mankind to-day is whether we are to have a State which limits itself to its own proper functions, leaving free play for the spontaneous activities of individuals and groups, or one which gathers all initiative into its own hands and rides rough-shod over liberties that are essential to a truly human life. That is what the war is about. And because it is about these fundamental values of civilization, the News-Letter has maintained from the beginning that we have a dual responsibility—first to defend the liberties which past generations have won for us against the attempt of the Axis Powers to wipe them out of existence, and, secondly, to make sure that the essential values are not filched from us in the very act of resistance through our own uncritical surrender to the passions and barbarism of war.

This attitude has constantly to be re-examined in the light of developments. In what follows I will try not to shirk any issue. That I shall satisfy everyone is not to be expected. We are faced by intolerable choices and we need to help one another to see what they are. Three attitudes may be taken to the policy of bombing.

(1) " ALL'S FAIR IN WAR "

Some people will say, " Why bother about the question at all ? Bombing is part and parcel of war, and the Germans deserve all they can get."

This, however, is simply to abandon the Christian responsibility of bringing a critical judgment to bear on national purposes and actions, from which we are no more absolved in war than in peace. To do this is to put the nation in the place of God and to revert, like the Nazis, to the worship of a tribal deity.

This critical attitude is all the more necessary in the present instance because both the Christian tradition and international law have laid great stress on the distinction between the killing of combatants and the killing of civilians. On this question of aerial

bombardment, moreover, there exists a definite formulation of the principles of international law. The Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments in 1922 appointed a commission of jurists who produced a code of rules about aerial warfare. Though it has never been converted into an international convention, this code carries great weight on account of the authority of its authors. It does not purport to lay down new law, but is an attempt to put into precise form the existing rules. It is based, as is pointed out by the Professor of Jurisprudence in Oxford,[1] " on the fundamental assumption *that a direct attack on non-combatants is an unjustifiable act of war.*" It contains the following articles.

> ARTICLE 22: Aerial bombardment for the purpose of terrorizing the civilian population, of destroying or damaging private property not of military character, or of injuring non-combatants, is prohibited.
>
> ARTICLE 24: Aerial bombardment is legitimate only when directed at a military objective—that is to say, an object of which the destruction or injury would constitute a distinct military advantage to the belligerent.

This means, as Professor Goodhart explains, that " deliberately to terrorize or injure non-combatants is no more a proper object of aerial warfare than it is that of land or naval war."

Respect for law is a vital principle of the civilization we are defending, and we must think twice before we become parties to a course which negatives the labours of generations to set restraints on the fury of war and to mitigate its cruelties.

(2) AN ABSOLUTE NEGATIVE

There are those who, in regard to the war as a whole, or to a bombing policy which involves the slaughter of non-combatants, feel that they confront a moral absolute. This, they say, is something to which we cannot consent, no matter what the consequences. One of the greatest services of Christianity to mankind is that it has furthered moral progress by inspiring men to say an absolute " No."

It must be noted, however, that we are concerned here with a judgment, not about personal conduct, but about corporate action in the political field. The consequences of our decision affect not only ourselves but others—it may be millions. If we say " no matter what the consequences," the judgment is responsible and Christian only if the consequences are clearly envisaged and honestly weighed.

If we want the Government to stop the bombing of cities, even at the cost of a victory of the Axis Powers, our decision involves all that might follow from such a victory—the re-introduction of slavery into Europe ; the reduction of Poles and Czechs to an unprivileged class ; the grinding down of the freedom-loving Norwegians ; the disappearance of France as an independent nation ; the submission of China to the yoke of Japan ; the re-enactment of the horrors perpetrated in Germany and the occupied countries of Europe among our own people ; the substitution of arbitrary rule for the reign of law ; the unashamed profession and practice of cruelty ; the darkening of the whole of human life by its subjection to terror. No one can deny that all these things might result from a victory of the Axis Powers. To deny to the United Nations the use of a weapon that might avert them is a responsibility that I cannot take.

I know men who see these consequences as clearly, and hate them as deeply, as I do and who yet believe that unswerving obedience to conscience, even where they cannot see their way, is the surest way of preserving what they most love and prize. To be loyal to conscience and to trust everything to God is the highest form of heroism. But this

[1] *What Acts of War are Justifiable?* By A. L. Goodhart. Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs. Clarendon Press, Oxford. 3d.

attitude may slide imperceptibly into something that is not Christian at all. It maintains its heroic quality only if God is not brought in as a *deus ex machina*. There is nothing either in Christianity or in experience to warrant the belief that God intervenes to relieve men from the consequences of their own decisions. That we can allow the war to be lost by our own choices and look to God to see to it that the results are not too bad is irresponsible behaviour. God is not a device which enables men to evade responsibility for their decisions.

(3) CRITICAL ASSENT TO MILITARY NECESSITY

Acceptance of war as the only means in existing circumstances of preventing the submergence of civilization by barbarism carries with it assent to measures that are essential for the achievement of military victory.

But everything turns, of course, on the meaning given to the term " military necessity." The Hague Regulations of 1907, expressing the judgment of as weighty a body of world opinion as could be drawn upon at that time, lay down quite explicitly that " the right of belligerents to adopt means of injuring the enemy is *not unlimited*." The plea of military necessity is obviously a slippery slope. Professor Goodhart quotes a French jurist who asks the pertinent question, " If it is permissible to drive inhabitants to desire peace by making them suffer, why not admit pillage, burning, tortures, murder, violation ? "

But, as the discussion of an absolute negative showed, there is no escape from this slippery slope into a secure standing-ground free from moral difficulties. In the social and political sphere there are no clear-cut choices between light and darkness, but only particular and often small steps which tend in a right or a wrong direction. International law moves in this sphere of the little less and the little more. Thus, to quote Professor Goodhart again :

> " Injuries to civilians which are the result of bona-fide military activity are legitimate. Thus, for instance, when a besieged town is bombarded, no violation of the rule has taken place if the inhabitants are injured. But the military operation must be a bona-fide one : there must be a fair balance between the means employed and the purpose to be achieved. An undefended city must not be destroyed even though by doing so a few enemy soldiers may be killed. If this were not so, then there would be no limit to a belligerent's right to ravage and destroy, because even the most peaceful village must contain a potential soldier. To attempt to justify such acts on the ground that they are part of military operations merely adds the contemptible sin of hypocrisy to a brutal and unchivalrous crime."

Because of the variety of factors that have to be weighed in a concrete decision, we cannot lay down with certainty in advance what that decision should be. The logic of events may force us from positions which we may have thought in the abstract we could hold. All rules of international law are subject to the limitation that new weapons or new forms of warfare may emerge which make fresh interpretations necessary. But while rules offer no infallible guidance, we have in each concrete situation a duty to fulfil. Each decision, or failure to make a decision, means that we are sliding down the slope or climbing painfully upwards. The great danger of the third attitude is that it may degenerate by gradual stages into the first.

On the specific question of the bombing of towns :

Mechanization has brought about a fundamental change in the conditions of war. The makers of munitions have become as important a factor as those who use them, and consequently as legitimate a target for attack as troops in the field. If their families are with them, their case is similar to that of civilians in a defended city, though there is a difference in scale which must not be overlooked.

The question to be decided is not simply whether we approve in the abstract of the present bombing policy. Its military efficacy is questioned in some competent quarters. But war is a collective and long-term enterprise. While there may have been at one time an alternative to the concentration of effort on the production of heavy bombers, decisions made many months ago may have created a situation in which the bomber has become the one effective weapon for the defeat of Germany's war effort.

It is not irrelevant to recall that within living memory Germany has waged three wars, all of which were fought on foreign soil, so that its own people have had no direct experience of the horrors of war which they have inflicted on others. Attacks on German cities, by inducing equality of first-hand experience of war, may be the means in the long run of effecting a necessary change in the German attitude to war.

But it is a question of first-class importance whether our bombing policy is directed to real military objectives or has as its object the terrorization of the German people. On this point there is not only a lack of clarity in the Government pronouncements, but the tone of the Air-Marshal's broadcast and of utterances in recent months of the Minister of Air and the Prime Minister are disquieting. A policy of bombing Germany city by city and scourging the Third Reich from end to end is both morally retrogressive, as involving what in the eyes of international law are unjustifiable acts of war, and incompatible with the concentration of effort on key military targets. The writer of an article in the current number of the *Fortnightly* enumerates what he regards as the main military targets in Germany, and asserts that not a single industry in the first five categories in order of importance is to be found in the vicinity of Cologne; Hamborn and Düsseldorf are a different story. Where a vital war industry is attacked it seems illogical to exclude from the target the adjacent houses of munition workers. But vindictiveness is a bad counsellor in matters of policy or strategy.

Just as the pacifist may precipitate by his choice a dark night of barbarism, so those who support the war, if they think only of the external danger and fail to guard against the deterioration of our purposes and barbarisation of our own minds, may equally imperil the future of civilization. The issue is being inexorably decided from day to day by the choices and acts of countless individuals. We need to hang on grimly to every remnant of humanity and compassion as the seed from which a future civilization may grow. We *cannot* gather figs from thorns, nor grapes from bramble bushes. With brutalizing influences on every side our humanity needs to have a shining quality.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, 19 DEAN'S YARD, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, S.W. 1.

Published by Dr. J. H. Oldham for the Council on the Christian Faith and the Common Life, and printed by the Church Army Press, Cowley, Oxford.